

Lady Echo

by Alison Uttley

Here is an enchanting story told with all the magic that has made this author a great favourite with young readers who do not mind being spellbound and charmed by gracious whimsy. The tale of Lady Echo and her Echo Wall is one of the dozen that are told in The Cobbler's Shop and other Stories.

At the gable end of the old farmhouse stands a great high wall. It is encrusted with ferns and yellow stonecrop, and ivy-leaved toadflax is draped over it like a mauve shawl of many hundreds of tiny flowers. The wall is so ancient it is the home for many creatures; field mice and toads live there, and birds nest in the holes, and rabbits play at the wall's feet. From every cranny in the grey limestone grow cascades of flowers, which hang down in fountains of pink and amber and blue – the herb-robert, and hare-bells, and blue cranesbill, and little wild pinks, all find a home in the great crumbling blocks of stone.

This wall was built over four hundred years ago, when Elizabeth was Queen of England and it carries memories of those days in its stones. It saw the bonfires when the Armada was sighted, and it heard the rejoicing when England was saved. It was filled with tales which have since become legend. It can remember all these things because it is the home of Lady Echo.

Lady Echo was born in the thick grey wall; she was created out of air when countrymen built the famous old wall near the farmhouse. Her clear crystal voice came singing from the stones as soon as the wall was finished, and one of the men standing a short distance away called to his friend. There she was ready to take up the words spoken and sung.

She lived down the centuries, hidden in the thickness of the wall, dwelling in a room concealed there. She had a bed of moss and a chair carved with lilies and shells of the limestone. She had a table of coral, and a chest of a thousand years ago, hidden there with her jewels and toys and treasures, all concealed in the wall.

There she stayed, sleeping until somebody roused her by a ringing voice, but sometimes she came out at night and wandered over the fields, picking flowers for her hair, washing her long white fingers in the dew, gathering the mushrooms to leave at a cottage door. She carried branches of honeysuckle and wild roses back to her bedroom. She sang when she walked at night, and her voice sometimes imitated the nightingale, so that people said, "Hark at the nightingale," when it was the Lady Echo, amusing herself in the groves. She whistled to the curlew and called in answer to the late cuckoo and the curving lap-wing.

She never wandered far away, she was devoted to her house in the orchard wall, and of course she had to answer all who called her. Birds, beasts and butterflies knew her and waited for her to come out. Cattle called for their calves and she helped them by her own voice. Horses whinnied and rubbed themselves on her stones. Little pigs rooted in the grass at her feet and the old sow lay there sleeping on the hem of her dress, content because Lady Echo was near to tickle her back and grunt to her.

Then a farmer's boy put a wooden seat close to the wall, a piece of a fallen oak tree, smoothed and planed. Ferns grew at its ends, fox-gloves sprung up by it, and children played there, very near Lady Echo's own dwelling. She could watch them through a crack in the wall and hear their talk and hear their games. They had their tea-parties on the seat, and she joined in, sipping the dew from the toy cups, tasting the petals spread out for bread and butter. Often, when the laughter came rippling from the children, Lady Echo laughed too, a gay little peal of joy. Then the children were startled, and they looked here and there, all except the farmer's little daughter, Jane, who knew the secret.

'Somebody's there,' they whispered, scared.

'It's only our Echo,' explained Jane airily. 'There's an Echo in our

wall. Just listen to it.'

'Cuckoo. Cuckoo. Cuckoo,' she called, and Lady Echo answered sweetly, 'Cuckoo. Cuckoo. Cuckoo.'

Then all the children began to call:

*'Cuckoo, cherry-tree,
Catch a bird and give it me,'*

and the Lady Echo quite enjoyed herself mocking their voices, catching a little voice and tossing it back so quickly that each child could hear her own words, repeated like a round.

They sang their favourite ditties, and the Echo was only too delighted to learn these new songs, with their queer little rhymes and simple music.

Once upon a time the Elizabethan children sang to her, fluting their rounds and catches, and Echo raised her voice and warbled back. At night their elders came to sing by moonlight and Echo learned their madrigals, as they practised for Christmas and Saints' days. She sang with them the latest songs, 'It was a lover and his lass', 'Nuts in May', and 'O mistress mine, where are you roaming?'

Echo's voice trilled like a silver stream, turning the voices of men and girls to those of angels. Her voice flew to the stars, and then went deep down to the earth's depths. Everyone talked of the wonderful Echo in the wall by the farmhouse, and they made up parties to sing their part-songs and to hear the way Echo picked up each voice and replied.

She sang with the Cavaliers, who stopped in their hunting to call her, and when the Ironsides came to drink at the well and shout their hymns, she dutifully answered with the valiant hymns, too. She moved with the times, and she never forgot. Cromwellians came to live at the farm, and she sang with them, but when King Charles was on the throne she joined in the gay tunes and laughter of the Restoration.

Mothers nursed their babies by the sheltering wall, and Lady Echo stretched out a thin white hand and touched the tiny faces of the infants and crooned her lullabies.

'Children always sleep well by Echo Wall,' said the mothers. 'We put them in the cradles there and know they will be safe, for the orchard wall shades them from too much sun, and it's as good as a nurse to have such a place.'

Then Lady Echo waited until they had gone, and out she came, with her laughter and cradle songs, and her glittering toys. She had a store hidden in the wall: balls of sunshine that flew in the air and spinning-tops of moonshine, toy lambs made of wool which had been left on the bushes by the sheep, wooden dolls made of twigs with faded dresses of flower petals, green rattles of rushes, and bird-whistles and popguns. The babies played with them and sometimes Lady Echo left the little toy in the child's hands, and there the mother found it.

'Look ye here, at this white baa-lamb, soft as silk, made from wool. Where has it come from? Somebody must have been in the orchard and dropped it in the cradle,' they said, astonished, but of course the baby couldn't say anything, for Echo always chose those who were too young to tell her secrets.

So the generations of children passed, they grew up, they left home, they married, and sometimes they returned. Echo felt lonely when the children went and only the parents were there to sit on the seat and to read aloud the letters and tell the news. Then a child would come back, grown up, with a child of her own, and Lady Echo would recognise her voice.

'This is where Echo lives,' the mother always told her child.

'This is where we played with Echo when we were little ones at the farm. You call and she answers. Sometimes if you have been very good, I believe she comes and peeps at you. I've never seen her, but perhaps you will.'

Every hundred years Echo came out of her hiding-place and was visible to a child at the farm. Every hundred years she sat on the ground and told her tales, or she walked in the orchard, or she ran tiptoe with her lovely golden hair streaming behind her and her gossamer grey dress floating around her like cobwebs, and her blue eyes shining like twin stars. She looked like a strip of moonlight moving over the grasses, or spring water flowing to the brook. Those who saw her spoke and asked for songs and tales, and she sang in her

heavenly voice from the store of all the years.

When the songs and tales were done, Echo drifted back to the wall, and those who had seen her rubbed their eyes and thought they had been dreaming. For Lady Echo threw over them a handful of her fern seed and toadflax seed, which she kept in her hollowed stone all ready to bring forgetfulness to her hearers. Only the very small, who were too young to speak, could remember, and nobody understood their infant babble.

So in each century she was visible and children heard her songs. The last time she came a little boy and girl were playing by the wall, calling to Echo and teaching her a song they had learnt at school.

'Listen to me, Lady Echo,' called Mary.

'Listen to me, Lady Echo,' mocked the Echo.

'As I was going to Strawberry Fair,' sang Mary.

'As I was going to Strawberry Fair,' repeated the Echo.

Then, to the children's surprise, Echo went on with the song.

*'Singing, singing, Buttercups and daisies,
I met a maiden selling her wares,
Trol-de-ree.'*

Mary and John stared at each other in astonishment. They saw Lady Echo come out of the wall, with a wreath of forget-me-nots on her hair and a bunch of bluebells in her hands.

'I know this song,' she said. 'Other children have sung it to me. Did I frighten you? I am Lady Echo.'

'Then it's true,' said Mary slowly, 'It's true that you come out and talk to children sometimes.'

'Our mother told us, but we've never seen you before,' said John. 'Our grandmother told her, and it was our great-gran who once saw you or dreamed it.'

'I only come once in a hundred years,' said Echo. 'Now I am here, what shall I tell you?'

'A tale, please, and a song. Anything will do,' said Mary quickly.

'Something about our house,' added John.

Echo looked at them and considered a moment. Everything was

very quiet, as if the trees in the orchard and the lambs over the wall were listening. The dog did not bark, the cows ceased their mooing, and even the birds stayed in their flight and rested on the oak tree while Echo began.

'Once a young man sang to me,' she said, and her voice was soft as a gentle breeze. 'He lived at the farmhouse, here. It was three hundred years ago. He was going off to fight in the wars. I knew him quite well, for he had often talked to me and sung to me. He was born here, and I looked after him when he was a child. He would have been the one to inherit the farm and lands, and his parents were good hard-working folk.

'I loved him because he was so gay, and because he was a poet. He made his poems here, and I listened to them. He shot with bow and arrow from this wall, and nobody shot as well as he. I caught one of the arrows and hid it. I have it still.'

Echo stretched out her hand and drew an arrow out of the wall and gave it to John to hold. The feathers were goose feathers, and the sharp tip had been blackened and hardened in fire.

'He was fine rider, and he used to bring his horse here and tether him to the ring you see halfway along the wall.'

She pointed, and the children looked over at the iron ring fastened to a stone.

'Yes we've seen that before,' nodded John. 'We fasten our pony here sometimes.'

'And he climbed the tallest trees yonder and called from the top to me,' continued Echo.

'My father climbed that tree when he was young,' boasted Mary.

'He could play the viol and sing, as well as bind up wounds and heal. He had hands with power in them. He was a lad I myself loved.'

Echo was silent as she thought of that boy of long ago.

'I heard him whisper to a girl whom he brought to my wall,' said Echo, soft as a dream. 'She was a beautiful child, with long dark hair. She wore a green and gold riding dress with long hanging sleeves. I had seen her before, riding with the huntsmen from the castle. He was poor and she was rich, from a noble family, but they loved each other. At my wall they told their love, in the starlight, that summer's night.'

'They whispered together, and I turned away, for I loved him too. He was the only human I had ever loved. But he spoke out loudly and bravely. He told the girl that nothing should ever separate them. He promised to love her for ever. Then he spoke about me, Lady Echo, who lived in the wall which bounded the orchard. He knew, for he was one of those young ones I had cared for, and he remembered. I had rocked his cradle and sung lullabies to him and given him toys to play with. I was young too, and I had kissed him as he leaned against the wall. I had hoped to keep him always. He told this girl about Lady Echo, and he said they must plight their troth and swear to love one another in Echo's hearing.

'The girl nodded her head, and she looked at him with her shining eyes, and she took his brown hand in her white one, and together they called to me.

'I love you,' they sang, and I answered, 'I love you.'

'I will always remember you,' they sang, and I replied, 'I will always remember you.'

'I will marry you,' they whispered, and I murmured, 'Marry you,' for I could not say more.

'Then the boy sang a parting song to the girl, and I, Echo, listened and did not say a word. This is the song he sang, and the girl in her green dress with hanging sleeves inset with green ribbons stood there, in his arms, held to his heart.'

Echo clasped her hands to her breast and brought back the song she had heard three hundred years ago:

'Greensleeves, now farewell, adieu.

God I pray to prosper you,

For I am still thy lover true.

Come once again and love me.

Greensleeves was all my joy,

Greensleeves was my delight,

Greensleeves was my heart of gold,

And who but Lady Greensleeves?'

The sweet plaintive air rang out in the strong voice and the country accent of a man who died centuries ago.

'And what happened then?' asked Mary, when Echo paused.

'Did he go and fight?' asked John.

'He kissed her, and they both left me and walked down the hill to the gates of the castle where the girl lived. He came back later for his horse, and then he said goodbye to me. You see, he had known me all his life. I was his friend and comforter.

'Goodbye, Echo. Goodbye,' he called, and I replied, 'Goodbye.' 'Remember me,' said he, laughing, and 'Remember me,' said I, and I laughed too.

'Then he swung his sword, and I tossed a handful of roses over him, but I never saw him again. Not really.'

'What do you mean – not really?' asked Mary.

'The girl came and leaned against the wall and wept because he had been killed in a skirmish soon after. I comforted her, and touched her cheeks, and wiped her eyes, and whispered of his beauty and goodness and all the things I knew of him. Then she, too, went away.'

Echo's voice was so small the children could scarcely hear her as she went on, 'And then – and then – I saw them – they came to see me – they often come – –'

They waited for more, but Echo was pressed close to the wall, watching something, and they, too, turned round. Two shadowy people, a young man and a girl, went walking across the orchard with their arms entwined and their heads close together as if they were telling secrets.

The young man suddenly threw back his head, and for a moment the children got a glimpse of his face, bright with happiness. He began to sing, in a gentle airy voice as a bird sings:

'Greensleeves, now farewell, adieu.

*God I pray to prosper you,
For I am still thy lover true.*

*Come once again and love me.
Greensleeves was all my joy,
Greensleeves was my delight,
Greensleeves was my heart of gold,
And who but Lady Greensleeves?'*

The voice faded away, the two lovers vanished, and only the apple trees were there with their branches waving, and the ferns by the walk shook in the passing wind.

‘We have seen – we have seen – what have we seen?’ stammered the children, as Lady Echo tossed the fern seeds over them. ‘We have seen something beautiful, but we can’t remember what it is.’